

Christmas in July



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The Country Courier

Federal transportation bill hits home

Editor's note: "On the road" is a series of stories the County Courier is producing that looks at transportation projects in Franklin County. The series kicks off this week with a look at the money headed our way as part of the federal transportation bill currently awaiting Pres. George W. Bush's signature in Washington D.C.

WASHINGTON D.C./FRANKLIN COUNTY: It's not something you typically expect — to go into work and have someone tell you you'll be getting \$1 million to do those things you've been hoping to get done, but just didn't know how.

In a sense, that happened to Enosburg Falls Village Manager Jonathan Elwell when a representative from Sen. James Jeffords called on Friday, July 29.

"She said, 'Jon, are you sitting down?'" Elwell recalled this week. He was told that as part of a long-awaited federal transportation bill, Enosburg Falls will be getting \$1 million for village roadwork and streetscaping.

The long-delayed \$286.5 billion highway bill garnered similar reactions throughout the state and region as news of its overwhelming passage in both the United States House and Senate spread late last week.

Pres. George W. Bush, who has threatened to veto previous versions of the transportation bill, is expected to sign the bill later this week. There have been 11 temporary extensions of the 1998-2003 highway bill as work on the current bill faced deadlock in recent years.

The relief, both in finally seeing the bill's passage and in the level of funding to Vermont and the region, was palpable.

"I couldn't be happier. I was beginning to think that we wouldn't have a transportation bill," said out-going St. Albans City Manager Brian Searles on Monday.

Vermont will receive more than \$1 billion in annual highway funds and for specific project funds over the next five years. This is a 40 percent increase in funding for the state's transportation systems over the previous transportation bill.

"For a little state, we got a lot of stuff," said Searles.

That's an idea that isn't lost on Sen. Jeffords or his office.

"It's Christmas in July," said Diane Derby, Jeffords' spokesperson.

"This highway bill makes the biggest federal investment in Vermont's roads and bridges in history. It will make Vermont's roads safer and less congested and bring new jobs and resources to our state for years to come. Every region of Vermont will benefit from this legislation," said Jeffords.

Congressman Bernie Sanders, Sen. Patrick Leahy and Jeffords all played a role in securing the record amount of funding for Vermont projects, but as ranking minority member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Jeffords' contribution was significant.

Projects throughout Franklin County and Northwestern Vermont will benefit from the bill. Some \$18 million will go toward completion of the Missisquoi Bay Bridge, while some \$2.46 million is going to the St. Albans Inter-modal Connector (formerly the Federal Street Extension), with \$1.5 million going specifically to extending Federal Street for trucking traffic.

"We're overjoyed," said Searles. "It really gets this project going in a real way."

Significant projects beyond just roads are also seeing funding in the bill, Searles pointed out. The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, a project which traverses the state and ends in Swanton, will also see \$5.8 million, he said.

Grand Isle County, Alburg in particular, will also see significant funding for some important projects, such as \$5 million for upgrades to the East Alburg Rail Bridge, to allow for automated boat access to Missisquoi Bay.

A deteriorating steel bridge in Montgomery that has been on a VTrans waiting list for several years will also get a significant \$770,000.

"It's been in the works for several years," said Montgomery Select Board member Ken Cota.

Like Enosburg Village, Alburg will also receive funds for streetscaping to the tune of \$330,000.

For Enosburg Falls, the news that \$1 million will be funding some badly needed downtown re-paving and other projects could not have come at a better time.

Following the February fire in Enosburg and the lingering question of whether Franklin Foods will remain in the area, village officials have been speaking with Jeffords' office regarding a number of projects, including money for necessary road improvements.

"They had an opportunity to find some funds in that area and they jumped on it," Elwell said. "This is absolutely a step in the right direction, and I hope that this is an omen of good things to come."

Among projects likely to benefit from the funding are completion of work on Orchard Street, repaving School Street, Missisquoi Road and Dickinson Avenue. Reworking and extending a connector from Jay View Road into the Hannaford development to the Franklin Foods facility could also see funding, Elwell said.

"That's a real strong possibility," he said. There are no firm plans for this at this point, but the idea has been discussed from several years, and the landowner and other parties were all amenable to it.

"But nobody's had any funds, so it never really got anywhere," Elwell said.

With the still unanswered question of whether Franklin Foods will remain in Enosburg Falls, details are still unclear. Details of how the federal money will be handed out and when still need to be hammered out as well.

"The good news is the money is secured," Elwell said.